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15. — *Egmont ; a Tragedy in Five Acts*. Translated from the German of GOETHE. Boston : James Munroe & Co. 1841. 8vo. pp. 150.

THE Tragedy of *Egmont* has been much praised by the admirers of Goethe. It is an attempt to work up historical events and characters into the dramatic form, and is classed with productions of what has been called the *Romantic school*. It is, moreover, a tragedy in prose. How far it is entitled to the applause it has received, may perhaps admit of a doubt. Has a poet the right to depart from historic truth in his delineations? Is he justified in taking an historic personage, and materially changing his character, perverting the facts of his life, and placing him amidst circumstances which we know could never have existed? We think not, though the practice of Sir Walter Scott may be pleaded in justification. The poet's art is not lawless and omnipotent. With the creatures of his brain he may do what he pleases; but, when he chooses to bring a real character into the circle of his airy beings, he cannot change him, by the touch of his wand, into an unsubstantial form, and extend over him the laws of his own poetical creation. He walks among them, an historical character still. The utmost the poet can do is to invent other actions and different situations from those in which the hero is known to have moved, but not opposite and contradictory ones. The poet has no right to claim for his work the advantage of his hero's historic fame, and at the same time load him with a fictitious infamy. He has no right to excite our interest by a great and brilliant name, and then to stain that name with vices, of which its possessor was never guilty; to attribute to a real person acts which he never did, and never could have done, and to place him in situations which it is morally impossible he should ever have occupied. But what has Goethe done in the Romantic drama of *Egmont*? Let us look at the leading facts in Count *Egmont's* life.

Lamoral, Count von *Egmont*, and Prince of *Gavre*, was a descendant of the warlike line of the Dukes of *Gueldres*. His ancestors had been distinguished in the history of the country; one of them had been Stadtholder of *Holland*, as early as the reign of *Maximilian*. The Count was born in 1522, and entered the military service early in life under *Charles the Fifth*, who invested him, in 1546, with the dignity of a Knight of the *Golden Fleece*. Under that Emperor's successor, *Philip the Second*, he distinguished himself as a general of cavalry in the famous battles of *St. Quentin*, 1557,

and Gravelines, 1558. "These battles," says Schiller, "made him the hero of his age."

Egmont was married to the Duchess Sabina of Bavaria, and by this brilliant connexion greatly increased the immense influence he already possessed. After the return of Philip to Spain, and while the Netherlands were under the regency of Margaret of Parma, an illegitimate daughter of Charles the Fifth, the troubles broke out in that country, which cost the Count his life. The beautiful and noble qualities of his character made him the object of the ardent love of his countrymen. He was generous, open-hearted, unsuspecting, and magnificent. He possessed in the highest degree the sense of honor, the courtesy, and the noble bearing of knighthood in its most brilliant days; and his martial fame was a spell upon the hearts of all. "Every public appearance of Egmont was a triumph; at the chivalrous pastimes, mothers pointed him out to their children. His religion was gentle and humane, but little enlightened, because it received its light from his heart and not from his understanding. He looked upon men as either good or bad; in his morality, there was no reconciliation between virtue and vice." William, Prince of Orange, was the only man who rivalled Count Egmont in the hearts of his countrymen; and when the violent encroachments of the gloomy tyranny of Spain upon their constitutional rights, and hereditary liberties, awakened the passions of the Netherlands, all eyes were turned to these two illustrious persons. William saw deeper than his friend into the real state of affairs. He was a man of calmer temperament, and divined at once the peril that threatened when the ferocious Duke of Alva was sent by the Spanish despot to quell the restless spirit of the nobility of the Netherlands. He escaped the snare, but nothing could alarm the too confident spirit of Egmont. He, and Philip of Montmorency, Count von Hoorn, were treacherously seized by the Duke of Alva, brought to trial before a tribunal constituted of creatures of his own, and, notwithstanding the great influence of their family connexions, and their privileges as Knights of the Golden Fleece, were sentenced to be beheaded. The sentence was carried into execution at Brussels on the 5th of June, 1563, when Egmont was in the forty-sixth year of his age. All the details of this most tragical event are narrated by Schiller, in his usual interesting style, in the appendix to the "*Geschichte des Abfalls der vereinigten Niederlande von der Spanischen Regierung*." (pp. 509 *et seq.* ed. 1818.)

Here are materials for a noble historical tragedy, without drawing largely upon the poet's invention. We have strongly contrasted characters, generous and mighty passions, honor, patriotism, and the charities of home, with a fearful tragical

termination, dreadful in itself and dreadful in all its accessories. What a drama would the genius of Shakspeare have wrought out of such events, such passions, such characters, and such woes.

It must be admitted, that Goethe has happily conceived and represented the spirit of popular discontent ; that the inferior personages in his drama are brought before us with a lively reality. The lower and more showy qualities of Egmont's character, too, are painted not without some truth of coloring. The bloody Alva is also well drawn, and the effects of his terrible presence among the Netherlanders are represented with all the vigor of Goethe's better genius. But what shall we say of the moral sense or intellectual perceptions of the poet or of his regard for historic truth, who represents Egmont, — the husband of an illustrious wife, and (like John Rogers) the father of nine children ; the patriot, the hero, and statesman, the admired and beloved of a whole nation, — as the licentious lover of a low-born girl, whom he has himself seduced ; and who thinks to heighten the tragic effect of a great and bloody historical catastrophe by adding to it the self-poisoning of a fictitious paramour ? It was bad enough for poor Egmont to have his head cut off by Alva ; but it is far worse to have his character murdered by Goethe. What a conception of the romantic poetry must Goethe have formed, if he thought it necessary to intermingle lust and suicide with the shedding of patriotic blood, to give his drama the romantic stamp. The true romantic spirit, made up of honor, courtesy, chastity, and the Christian virtues, appears to have been lightly esteemed by Goethe, either as a source of poetical effect, or as the controlling principle of life. A romantic hero, in his estimation, was a man who showed his lofty spirit by seduction and licentiousness. A rake and his mistress and his mistress's mother were to him a highly " æsthetic " group and the very incarnation of romantic poetry.

We think, then, this drama has moral faults which are fatal to its claims as a work of lofty excellence ; and that these faults imply a failure in intellectual perception and artistic skill. It is by no means a favorable specimen of the genius of Goethe. The translator has performed his task with spirit and general fidelity. We notice occasionally an erroneous translation of an idiomatic phrase ; but this is not surprising in a drama so abounding in popular phraseology and racy idiomatic terms. The translation represents the original with uncommon accuracy, on the whole ; but we hope the modest translator will next turn his hand to some work free from the objections, in point of morals and of art, which are justly chargeable upon "*Egmont*."